

# Narrating the Picturesque: Reading Tagore's Landscape from His Memory to His Art

SANGHITA SANYAL

“Every landscape is, as it were, a state of the soul.”

[Henri-Frédéric Amiel]

Analogous to this insight of Amiel, in his formative text *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama also holds on to an opinion that, “[T]he landscape is a work of the mind, another compartment in the cultural baggage we all lug about. The scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock, shaped by the same rich and complex traditions that frame other aspects of our cultural world.”<sup>1</sup> Such memory, we see, can be applied in various ways in literature: to establish the historical-temporal context, or to create an individual or cultural identity, or to simply instil a feeling of nostalgia in the text.<sup>2</sup> Now, what Schama makes us inquisitive about is, whether the memory of landscape that enables creative art, is only bound up by remembering, recollecting, reflecting, memorialising personal specifics of geography or a beautiful moment, or whether it blends the artist’s personal/spiritual perception of landscape as well. In that case, such a kind of scene would certainly pack in much more than the visual landscape only, and facilitate a glance into the artist’s transcendental attainment beyond the dimensional limitations of the canvas. In fact, the painting in a way, would enable a deeper plunge into the artist’s mind. In this paper, I would perpend specifically the (‘revelations’ through the) landscapes that Rabindranath Tagore used to ‘construct’ in his various paintings. In this paper, I argue that the landscape paintings of Tagore are not just a sheer transcript of his visual memory, but a glimpse of a transcendental spirit with which

he felt connected to the Immanent—something which has been pervasive in the core of his oeuvre.

An instance can be cited from a different context: on 23rd October, 1926, at Hotel Imperial, Vienna, Tagore wrote (which later formed the preface to his collection of poems *Banabani*,) about a letter that he received from Shantiniketan; this letter took his heart away to the memory of the environs of Uttarayan, that served as a perpetual solace for his mind which was tired of traveling. This landscape of his memory always wove a kind of nostalgia and transmuted itself into a mystic state which can perceive Eternity in even the minutiae of the mundane. In his Art, Tagore had always shown a sustained and deep impact of the rural landscape of Silaidah and Bolpur, along with other natural settings that created a memory, a virtual setting which would leave an indelible mark on his consciousness. Tagore would not only recreate them in his prose, poetry or letters, but also in his paintings, which he began much later.

However, specific to my study, I propose that his ‘nisarga’ or painted landscapes too, emerge from this innate connection of memory and transcendental creativity. The main focus here would be to explore his creative content and strain out specific references to the nature and landscape of a space, and analyse how it played an integral role in shaping his spirituality and philosophy behind his own creation. In other words, our method would involve closely observing a combination of a few landscape paintings of Rabindranath Tagore and read how his verbal reminiscences seemed to be wonderfully coordinated, connected and manifested smoothly into those canvases. It is best described in Tagore’s own words:

টুকরো যত রূপের রেখা  
 সঞ্চিত রয় মনের চিত্রশালে  
 কখন ছবির আকার নিয়ে  
 জোড়া লাগায় শিল্পকলার জালে।।

Fragments of forms stored in the mind  
Combined in pictures at the magic touch of art.  
[*Chitralipi*, 1940]<sup>3</sup>

## ABOUT TAGORE'S PAINTINGS

It is a widely-known fact that from doodles and scribbles, Tagore had finally shifted to mature, serious painting rather late in his life; and such a shift had attracted interest as well as criticism. Although he immersed himself completely into art at one point, Tagore had always maintained mixed and somewhat detached reactions to his own creations. He considered his own painting activity as a companion to spend time in idle playfulness (“খেলার ছলে বেলা কাটাবার সঙ্গিনী”—*Khelar chhale bela katar songini*)<sup>4</sup> as told to Rani Chanda in his letters and most often expressed a facetious diffidence about their quality, especially after they were duly accepted and lauded or even sharply criticised in India and abroad. According to critics like Ahmed Rafique and N.C. Bhattacharya, Tagore himself was largely responsible for activating tenebrous and problematized feelings around his art of painting. It was difficult to shed off prejudices around his stylized art, all the more because he stoked them most often with his jesting and playfully ‘apologetic’ stance. In 1930 he wrote:

An apology is due from me for my intrusion into the world of pictures...I, as an artist, cannot claim any merit for my courage, for it is the unconscious courage of the unsophisticated, like that of one who walks in dream on perilous path, he is saved only because he is blind to the risk...<sup>5</sup>

As a result, Tagore was most often considered a kind of ‘outlandish’, ‘émigré’ in the discourse of Art. Even renowned critics like W.G. Archer (1959), Shivnarayan Ray (1973), Pranabranjan Ray (1977),

Francis Watson (1986), even Andrew Robinson (1989) gravitated to sharp conclusions like Tagore took to painting as a refuge to counter his “death anxiety”, or as a subliminal expression of sexual desire or simply because he wanted to restore his fame and popularity in the Western world following the political flak he faced after 1917. Probably, Tagore’s paintings would not have attracted such controversial opprobrium if he had only been an artist, painting throughout his life. As a polymath who has consistently left finest and deepest footprints of a master in all that he has composed—from poetry to fiction, to music, drama, essays, political treatise—Tagore’s aesthetic and intellectual range was so overwhelmingly wide that perhaps when finally, he treaded into the world of canvas and the paintbrush and started delivering masterpieces there as well, it was not a matter to be easily accepted.

However, when seen objectively, it makes a lot of sense to read Tagore’s paintings as not a shift, but as an obvious, instinctive exploration of a different form of expression, narration—only possible for a litterateur of his depth. Tagore never really had to shift from one form of expression to another, that is, verse to novels, to short stories to prose poems or songs or dance drama in any watertight chronological order. He could and would compose simultaneously. With that argument in mind, it would be easier to believe that Tagore’s interest and action of painting could also be an exploration of just another narrative form by the master storyteller.

It is perhaps for a painting’s capacity of universal expression, that Tagore felt a pull, a need to explore it for the very sake of his own satisfaction and creative joy. In 1941, Tagore wrote to Rani Chanda:

অনেক সময় মনে হয় যে, ছবির মার নেই। তার বিশেষ রেখা বিশেষ ফর্ম বদল হলেও রসের হানি হয় না। ছবিতে শিশু পর্যন্ত কিছু না কিছু একটা পায়। ভাষাতে তো তা নয়।<sup>6</sup>

[Most of the times, I feel that nothing can take over painting.

Form or style might alter, but that does not affect the sentiment. In a picture, a child also has something to take back. It is not so with language.]

Eminent scholar-critic Ahmad Rafique, mentioned earlier, makes a cogent observation in his book *Rabindranather Chitrashilpa*, which can be referred to, in this context. He observes:

আসলে আত্মপ্রকাশের টানে, এক ফর্ম থেকে অন্য ফর্মে যাওয়া, বৈচিত্র্যের টানে মন দেওয়া-নেওয়ার কারণেই সাহিত্যের ভাষা থেকে রবীন্দ্রনাথের ছবির ভাষায় প্রবেশ, যা মোটেই অনুপ্রবেশ ছিল না। হতে পারে, সাহিত্যের ফর্মে যাকে প্রকাশ করতে অসুবিধা তার জন্যই রেখা-রঙের ফর্ম হাতে নেওয়া, অতৃপ্তি নিরসনের জন্যই ছবির ভাষায় কথা বলা।... ছবির ভাষা সর্বজনীন, সাহিত্য-ভাষার সীমাবদ্ধতা ছবিতে নেই। এমন একটি ফর্মকে কোনো শক্তিমান স্রষ্টার ছেড়ে দেবার কথা নয়, বিশেষ করে ব্যবহারের ক্ষমতা যদি তার থাকে।<sup>7</sup>

[Actually, in order to express perfectly, shifting from one form to another, in order to bring variety in the emotiveness, Tagore had stepped into the world of visuals, from the world of words. Perhaps adopting the canvas was an attempt to redress the discontent that might have been often caused by the inadequacy of words in literary expressions... The language of paintings is universal, doesn't face the restrictive parameters of language, as in literature. No mighty artist would want to let go of such a powerful form, especially when he has the skill to utilize it.]

Hence it can be stated with conviction that to dismiss Tagore's painting as just a whim or a strategic effort of an artist to retain his popularity in his twilight days would be a way of trivializing and misprizing another aspect of his creative expression. Rather, we must consider beyond the obvious and perceive specially the landscape

paintings of Tagore as texts evocative of emotional memories, beyond the visual. Tagore's landscapes are probably the rarest of findings among the plethora of human faces or portraits—of men, women, self-portraits, animals et al. His style was distinctly original, although verisimilitude with abstract art was perceivable most often. Tagore explained it in *Chitralipi 2* (1940):

It interests me deeply to watch how lines find their life and character, as their connection with each other develops in varied cadences, and how they begin to speak in gesticulations. I can imagine the universe to be a universe of lines which in their movements and combinations pass on their signals of existence along the interminable chain of moments. The rocks and clouds, the trees, the waterfalls, the dance of the fiery orbs, the endless procession of life send up across silent eternity and limitless space a symphony of gestures.<sup>8</sup>

### **NISARGA OR LANDSCAPES IN TAGORE'S PAINTINGS**

Tagore's perception of nature was seen through a painter's lens. In 1900, a letter written from Silaidaha, Kushtia to friend Jagadish Chandra Bose confirms that among other literary practices, he was painting too, in his sketchbook. That means, beside the regular zamindari work, Tagore's '*asmaandari*' was also running at full swing. *Asmaandari* would be a difficult phrase to translate—it can be explained as Tagore's expression to define all his aesthetic, creative activities, and as a part of it, Tagore was immersing himself in writing prose, poetry and painting as well.

During his stay at Silaidaha, where he would visit the Tagores' zamindari estate periodically, our poet's mind was greatly moved by the natural exuberance of the locale. Away from the urban ennui of Jorasanko, Calcutta, Tagore's mystic mind was inspired by the natural environ surrounding him. The several facets of the beautiful Padma

River, the nature around and its people exerted a profound impact on the deeper portals of his consciousness. In 1892, he recounted:

আমার সমস্ত মনটাকে কে যেন তুলিতে করে তুলে নিয়ে এই রঙিন শরৎ-প্রকৃতির উপর আর এক পোঁচ রঙের মতো মাখিয়ে দিচ্ছে, তাতে করে এই সমস্ত নীল সবুজ এবং সোনার উপরে আর একটা যেন নেশার রং লেগে গেছে। বেশ লাগছে।<sup>9</sup>

[My entire being seems to have been taken up by someone on a paintbrush who dabs it over like a layer of colour on this autumnal landscape, and it feels as if, over and above this blue, green and gold, it is mixed as well, like another intoxicating colour. It feels nice.]

Swiss modernist painter Paul Klee believed that visualization is actually a manifestation of an artist's mindfulness which may not always be realized by everybody else. The artist fuses emotions with the physical and transcribes *that* on the canvas with his colours. The visual memory of the corporal blends with an intuition, an instinct and that enables a creation which is then no more a mere replication of an object or a scene, but a translation of a perception on paper as we see in Figure 1. Critical perspectives on Tagore's paintings almost seems incomplete without referring to Somendranath Bandyopadhyay's book *Rabindra-Chitrakala: Rabindrasahityer Patabhumika*. He perceived Tagore's visualization as similar to Klee's opinion:

আসলে ল্যান্ডস্কেপগুলি বিশ্বদৃশ্যের নকলনবিশী অর্থাৎ প্রকৃতির মিথ্যাসাক্ষী নয়। এর হাতছানি নিসর্গরূপের অন্তরমহলে। রঙ রেখার স্বচ্ছ যবনিকার অন্তরালে যেন রহস্যঘন অশরীরী সস্তার অদৃশ্য নড়াচড়া লক্ষ করা যায়। সেই গা-ছমছম অনুভবকেই বোধহয় বিনিয়ন (Biniyon) নাম দিয়েছেন “cosmic significance of landscape”<sup>10</sup>

[Actually, these landscapes are not a blunt imitation of the

surrounding world, that is, not a fallacious depiction of Nature. It calls one into the deeper portals of Nature's quintessential ethos. Beyond the transparent veil of the lines and colours, there can be sensed a pulsating presence of a mysterious being. Probably it is that uncanny sensation that Biniyon calls the "cosmic significance of the landscape"]

Among his corpus of paintings, landscape is the rarest form of expressions; rarest would mean, they are least in numbers, compared to the numbers of portraits, animals etc that he has painted throughout. Yet, rightly, Tagore's *nisarga* too has a strange beauty and strength in its visualization. It almost feels that when Tagore painted, the basis of each memory and visual would transcend into a kind of 'cosmic significance'—into a vision. It wouldn't be too dramatic to say that the landscapes attain a living character about themselves, probably much expected of a storyteller of Tagore's stature. We must remember Tagore himself had justified his paintings as "Their ultimate purpose is not to illustrate or to copy outer fact or inner vision, but to evolve a harmonious wholeness which finds its passage through our eyesight into imagination."<sup>11</sup> In a way, as Ahmed Rafique also puts it, "ব্যক্তি ও তার পরিবেশের মিথস্ক্রিয়ায় ছবির জন্ম" [*byakti o tar poribesher mithoskriyaye chhobir jonmo*] that is, "a painting is born as a communion of a personality and its surroundings." Tagore's paintings are most obviously examples of such a communion, between his visual memory and mystic vision as we see in the apparent formlessness of objects in his landscapes (Figure 2).

In November 1930, following an exhibition of Tagore's paintings in New York, a critic observed:

The symbolism of many of the figure groups and landscapes is of the simple, poetic type that each may interpret for himself... The work fits into a habit of the mind that is essentially poetic and picturesque... Despite Tagore's warning

["no significance attached"], we cannot help trying to retrace the journey from the subconscious, trying to visualize the mystic concept from which they spring.<sup>12</sup>

Tagore himself considered this capacity to create as a quest for freedom and called it "দেখার দৃষ্টি" [*dekhar drishti*] which is not a mere eye but a perception, of something 'beyond the visible'. In a letter to painter Jamini Roy he writes:

... দৃষ্টির ওপরে দেখার ধারা আমাদের চেতনাকে উদ্রেক করে রাখে।... ছবি একটি নিশ্চিত প্রত্যক্ষ অস্তিত্বের সাক্ষী। তার ঘোষণা যত স্পষ্ট হয়, ততই সেই হয় একান্ত... যখন ছবি আঁকায় মনকে টানলো তখন দৃষ্টির মহাযাত্রায় মন স্থান পেলো। গাছপালা জীবজন্তু সকলই আপন আপন রূপ নিয়ে চারিদিকে প্রত্যক্ষ হয়ে উঠতে লাগলো। রেখায় ও রঙে সৃষ্টি করতে লাগলো যা প্রকাশ হয়ে উঠেছে।... এই যে নিছক দেখবার জগৎ ও দেখাবার আনন্দ এর মর্মকথা বুঝবেন তিনি—যিনি যথার্থ চিত্রশিল্পী।<sup>13</sup>

[The propensity to look beyond the visible keeps our consciousness active... a picture is a witness to the presence of such a concrete reality, the clearer it gets, the more personal it is... when my heart was engrossed in painting, it was drawn into an eternal journey of a vision... The flora and the fauna gradually started to appear in their own appearance, and what is visible, started to get created with my strokes and colours... This blend of the mere visible world with the joy of viewing them would be comprehended only by one who is a perfect painter.]

Again, in another letter Tagore writes:

অনেক সময়ে ছবি দেখলে যে মনে হয়, আহা, এইখানে যদি থাকতুম — ঠিক সেই ইচ্ছেটা এখানে পরিতৃপ্ত হয়। মনে হয় একটি জাজ্জল্যমান

ছবির মধ্যে বাস করছি। এখানকার রৌদ্রে ছবি দেখার বাল্যস্মৃতি  
ভারী জেগে ওঠে।<sup>14</sup>

[Often when we watch a photograph, we feel, ah, I wish I was inside this. Here, that very desire seems to be satiated. It feels I am located inside a brilliant picture. This sunshine evokes my childhood memories of watching pictures.]

Tagore's paintings show a romantic tendency to feel one with the greater, mystic idea of Nature, yet his execution would be covertly Expressionistic. Again, beyond the memories of the Himalayas, Kalimpong, Mongpu, Darjeeling, or the mountains, landscapes of the western world, the rivers, flowers, trees, the scenery of Shantiniketan, the Kopai river where he would finally return, it was probably the memories of the times on and around the Padma River that had etched an everlasting image in his mind: a timeless image, which may not be simplified as just a memory (Figures 3, 4 and 7). That is why, probably, even while looking at the beauty of Kopai, he would remember Padma from the past:

পদ্মা কোথায় চলেছে দূর আকাশের তলায় / মনে মনে দেখি তাকে...<sup>15</sup>

[Where is Padma flowing under a sky afar/ In my mind's eyes,  
I can see her..."]

Particularly in this poem, we find Tagore is attempting a comparative description of the two rivers and the scenes around them and in no time, we realize, Tagore perceives two different worlds—bound in the nature and the characters about the rivers themselves. If Kopai is a young Santhal girl, living in the village, *pratibeshini*, more domestic, familiar, Padma is *swatantra*, patrician “লোকালয়ের পাশ দিয়ে চলে যায়—/তাদের সহ্য করে, স্বীকার করে না” [“passes by the localities—endures them, but does not acknowledge them”]



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

In the depths of his consciousness, perhaps Tagore felt a pantheistic presence of Life spread amidst the smallest elements of Nature—be it the waves, the clouds, the ubiquitous dewdrop on the tip of a grain, the trees quivering in the breeze—a momentary sighting would turn out to be a momentous renaissance of wonder for the painter-poet. He would perceive a parallel living universe in those silent elements of Nature. He would try to capture *that* Life beyond the immediate scene on his canvas and there, his perception would intervene with his visuals. Specifically, my argument therefore shapes into observing two distinct aspects of Tagore's paintings and how they are interdependent—first, his subject and second, his style.

Here, we must mention that Somendranath Bandyopadhyay also makes two very pertinent observations which holds water for our discussions in the following segment: first, Tagore's landscapes are memory-based and mostly a visualization of Bengal, and second, his paintings of animals are imagination-based, and so seems more surreal, thus making a clear distinction between the two mental capacities of memory and imagination. However, we perceive Tagore's landscape paintings as his attempt to harness his own visual memories and meditate over them to a level, where the immediacy of the scene would transcend into something deeper and surreal. So, although not distorted like his animals, the landscapes are stylized and more eloquent in their meaningfulness and probably anticipates a special/lateral strain of Expressionism. One may be surprised to observe the sky in a painting of the bard (Figure 5), that eerily resembles that of Edvard Munch's *Scream* (1893).

Another general observation is that most of the landscapes Tagore painted showed nature bathed in the evening light, skies and forms coagulating into ominous silhouettes, thus invoking a mystery and a sense of disquiet and silence. As an example, we can refer to a few paintings where the trees and the architecture seem to be in a kind of dialogue. In fact, even in the absence of any human figure, the overpowering landscape's living presence becomes the sole subject of

the canvas; no single element in the painting can be considered to be in focus. Apparently made of somewhat “fugitive translucence, suggestive, tantalizing, never really articulate”,<sup>16</sup> the paintings become the deeper perception of the artist that synthesizes them into a whole, where the presence of an eternal conversation between the dense trees, the small hut at a distance, the mansion with Gothic pillars, and the twilight hue of the sky cannot be missed (Figure 6).

Tagore believed that painting involves realizing a “principle of rhythm which transforms inert materials into living creations.”<sup>17</sup> This action is typically romantic that upholds imagination as a higher capacity to perceive and realize the One amongst the many, the Infinite beyond the finite, the transcendent beyond the immanent. This personification gets very obvious in Tagore’s visions. Between 1893 and 1895, as Rafique quotes from *Chhinnapatrabali*, a collection of personal letters written by Tagore to his niece Indira Devi Chaudhurani, Tagore creates a few scenes of the Silaidaha, Padma bank landscape with his words. We find such a perspective towards nature is obviously mystic, and they reflect heavily upon his *nisarga* paintings too. Standing at the bank of the Nagar River he watches the natural landscape and perceives it as a lonely, homeless woman with a golden veil, who draws it loosely and walks slowly, almost reminding us of the ubiquitous Byronic beauty as a parallel. Again, in a different context, he describes the overcast clouds at the Padma bank and writes that the clouds are scattered over the boundless river and from the mysterious interior of the river it seems a sublime goddess of light emerges in silent glory and the grey clouds above the paddy fields crouch like an immense lion that waits submissively—as if defeated by the power of this divine figure. These words weave a tapestry that has an uncanny verisimilitude with the paintings Tagore created later, where the scenes capture something ethereal, beyond the obvious. The three paintings (Figures 7, 8 and 9) can be seen as examples of the golden clouds touching the horizon and the trees and a nuanced use of darkness. The following two paintings can be seen

as examples of the golden clouds touching the horizon and the trees.

Interestingly, Tagore feels a strange lonesomeness engulfing nature at times. For instance, in a letter (1894) he describes a harvested field of Patisar as a vast stretch on which the abundance of moonbeams creates an elegiac overtone of universal separation, as if a white-clad woman is swooning over a huge sepulchral tomb, pining and yearning for someone. The painting titled *The Last Harvest* (Figure 8) can be set as an illustrative example that portrays a landscape in the twilight when the farmers gather after the day's work.

Unlike the observation with the preceding paintings, here, despite the presence of five human figures, the lonely, dark landscape becomes the sole subject of the painting.

Tagore often saw the Padma bank as a horizontal line of treetops that looked like a green cloud of leaves and the union of the land and the water seemed to him like two shy lovers approaching each other with a deep, passionate anticipation.<sup>18</sup> Such a tendency of personifying nature, attaching human attributes to the various natural elements is typically Romantic and is caught as a parallel in many more where we cannot miss the sublimity of Nature that Tagore perceives and translates on his canvas. What is also unmistakable is a stark use of solid colours, viz. yellow, black and dark red and green.

At this juncture, it is necessary to remember *Ranger Rabindranath* (1997)—Ketaki Kushari Dyson and Sushovan Adhikari's neoteric research on Tagore's use of colour and metaphors of colour in his art and literature. There, Dyson, in her attempt to point at the bard's supposed protanopia, gives exhaustive details of his in/ability to use colours and their subtle shades. At one point she refers to the play *Bhagnahriday* and speaks about how Tagore verbalizes 'andhakar' or darkness. She says: অন্ধকার যে কত রকমের হতে পারে... (25) [A loose translation of which would be, that darkness can be of many kinds] and goes on to distinguish between a darkness that is pensive and melancholic, pertained to romantic realization of love and 'chaotic' darkness which even carries a subliminal sense of death. She observes:

বনের আঁধার মদত দিতে পারে মনেরই আঁধারকে। বিষাদ-আঁধার, বিষাদের প্রতিমূর্তি অন্ধকাররাশি, জ্যোতিহীন নয়ন... হৃদে একটু আঁধার।... (25)

[The darkness of the forest is like an extension of the darkness in the mind. A sad-darkness, darkness like a reflection of melancholy, the dim in the eyes... a dark speck in the heart]

Dyson directly asserts this overt metaphorization of darkness as an effect of Keats' poetry on Tagore:

কোন সন্দেহ থাকতে পারেনা, ইংরেজী সাহিত্য এই অন্ধকারচেতনা কে পুষ্টি জুগিয়েছিল, দৃঢ়তা দিয়েছিলো আঁধার-মৃত্যুর কানেকশনকেও।

[There can be no doubt that it is English literature which fed this consciousness of the dark in the poet, thus even cementing the archetypal connection between darkness and death.]

Dyson quotes *Ode to a Nightingale* and reminds us of its impact and impression on Tagore's poetry and how he often admitted his sense of close identification with the poetry of John Keats. According to Dyson:

কীটসের সঙ্গে কবিধর্মে রবীন্দ্রনাথের যে একটা গভীর মিল ছিলো তা যাঁরা উভয় কবির টেক্সটের সঙ্গে পরিচিত তাঁরা ভালোভাবেই জানেন।... দুই কবির মধ্যে একটা গভীর সাদৃশ্য আছে বলেই রঙের ব্যবহারের ক্ষেত্রে তাঁদের মধ্যে যে সূক্ষ্ম তফাৎটুকু ধরতে পারা যায় তা প্রশিধানযোগ্য।... লক্ষণীয় কীটস কত স্বচ্ছন্দেই—এবং যথাযথ ভাবে বর্ণনায় টেনে আনেন গোলাপি, লাল, বেগুনী রঙের বিভিন্ন শেডদের। ঠিক এই জিনিসটাই রবীন্দ্রনাথে আমরা পাচ্ছি।

[Rabindranath's profound similarity in poetry with that of Keats is well known to those who are familiar with the texts

of both the poets... Precisely therefore, the subtle difference in their use of colour is also reckonable... It is to be noted carefully how easily—and aptly—Keats draws out the different shades of pink, red, purple in his description of nature. This is exactly what we do not get in Rabindranath]

Contextually, a few examples of such *nisarga* and Tagore's memories are necessary to cite here. It would be rather simplistic to define and write off the subjects of Tagore's landscape paintings to be just so—they capture a vision beyond the visible, where his perception fuses with the reality; where the scene from memory enlarges to accommodate something surreal, which hints at a much larger, mystic vision. As Ahmed Rafique puts it:

গ্রামবাংলার নিসর্গ সৌন্দর্য্যকে... দেখার মধ্য দিয়ে প্রকৃতির অন্তর্লোকেরও যে রূপ তাঁর কাছে ধরা পড়েছিল তারই চিত্ররূপ প্রতিফলিত করতে চেয়েছেন রঙে, তুলি-কলমের টানে।<sup>19</sup> (139)

[In the rural beauty of Bengal Tagore viewed an inner living world which he tried to reflect on his canvas with his colours and brushstrokes.]

Tagore then tries to realize this vision on the canvas through a style which is a kind of dystopic portrayal of that perception. The distinct absence of details itself emerges as a basic feature of his paintings. Bandyopadhyay almost resonates Dyson and goes further to hint at the presence of a sublime Being:

রবীন্দ্রনাথের ছবির সাধারণ লক্ষণ—পুঙ্খতা-বর্জন এখানেও উপস্থিত। গাছপালা মাটি জল কোথাও কোনো details নেই। গাছের শাখা, পাতা, ফুল এমন-কি যাকে বলে কনস্ট্রাকশন অনেক সময় এ-সব কিছুই নেই, কিন্তু প্রাণ-সঞ্জীবিত একটা আন্ত গাছের জীবন্ত উপস্থিতি অনুভব করা যায়।<sup>20</sup>

[A general observation common about Rabindranath's paintings is an absence of intricate details in them. The trees, land, water—nowhere can be seen an iota of detailing. In the indistinguishable branches of a tree or a leaf or a flower—which can be called a construction of aspects is not there. However, what one cannot miss is a sensuous perception of a full-sized living entity of a tree beyond the painted element.]

Contextually, he also quotes a German connoisseur's appraisal of Tagore's paintings, following the exhibition at Gallerie Moeller, Berlin in 1930: "New visions were seized in his pictures that descend to the depth, to the origin, of which the reality of the world is only a feeble copy, reflected light".<sup>21</sup>

On a different note, this form of art that Tagore created gets justified in its conscious contravention of established styles like expressionism, surrealism, automatism despite dabbling with almost all of them. He seemed to be seeking the same spiritual freedom even through his strokes and brushworks, and his paintings would defy any structure, measure or calculation. His strokes are spontaneous and automatized, capturing a kind of urgency, a frenzy to attain something which he has been visualizing beyond the scene, which is that "harmonious wholeness" that makes its way "through our eyesight into imagination".

Despite "grotesque", "bizarre", "sinister", "abysmal" and "haunting" being the commonly acquired epithets by which Tagore's paintings are described, we must also remember that the same is what Albrecht Dürer once said of Hieronymus Bosch's paintings: that nothing like them was ever "seen before nor thought of by any other man." (End note 22) It can only be a manifestation typical of a mystic's way of retrieving memory and pouring his personality into it, in a different medium.

## NOTES

- 1 Book Review of Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory*. Accessed January 17, 2023.  
<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/simon-schama/landscape-and-memory/>
- 2 Article "Literary Memory". Accessed on January 17, 2023.  
<https://literacle.com/literary-memory/>
- 3 Nilanjan Bandyopadhyay, *Sangini Oi Chitrakala* (Kolkata: Viswa-Bharati Publications, 2010), 156.
- 4 Ahmed Rafique. *Rabindranather Chitrashilpa* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Shilpakala Akademi) 1996, p. 77.
- 5 N.C. Bhattacharya. "Paintings of Rabindranath Tagore", *Roop Lekha* (1958) Volume 28 (1-2) pp 66-74.
- 6 Rafique, *Chitrashilpa* 77.
- 7 Rafique, *Chitrashilpa* 76.
- 8 Rabindranath Tagore. "My Pictures", *Chitralipi 2*, 1940, Viswa Bharati Publishing Department, Calcutta p.4  
Accessed on March 7, 2023  
<https://indianculture.gov.in/ebooks/chitralipi-2-rabindranath-tagore>
- 9 Rafique, *Chitashilpa*, 91.
- 10 Somendranath Bandyopadhyay. *Rabindra-Chitrakala: Rabindrasahityer Patabhumika*. (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1982) 109.
- 11 Rabindranath Tagore. "My Pictures", *Chitralipi 2*, 1940, Viswa Bharati Publishing Department, Calcutta p.4  
Accessed on March 7, 2023  
<https://indianculture.gov.in/ebooks/chitralipi-2-rabindranath-tagore>
- 12 Critical view of Tagore's paintings by the West, as quoted in *Ranger Rabindranath* p.713.
- 13 Rafique, *Chitashilpa*, 102.
- 14 Rafique, *Chitashilpa*, 91.
- 15 "Kopai", *Punascha. Rabindra Rachanavali* Vol. 8 (Kolkata: Viswa Bharati, 2010) p. 233.
- 16 *Ranger Rabindranath* p.713.
- 17 Tagore, "My Pictures", 4
- 18 For the quoted lines from *Chhinna Patrabali*, see Rafique 136.
- 19 Rafique, *Chitashilpa*, 139.
- 20 Bandyopadhyay, *Rabindra-Chitrakala*, 108.
- 21 Bandyopadhyay, *Rabindra-Chitrakala*, 117.
- 22 Rabindranath Tagore: The Art of Rabindranath Tagore (New Delhi, Rupa Publications, 2004) vi

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Article “Literary Memory”. Accessed on January 17, 2023.

<https://literacle.com/literary-memory/>

Book Review of Simon Schama’s *Landscape and Memory*. Accessed January 17, 2023.

<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/simon-schama/landscape-and-memory/>

Bandyopadhyay Nilanjan. *Sangini Oi Chitrakala*, Kolkata: Viswa-Bharati Publications, 2010, 156.

Bandyopadhyay, Somendranath. *Rabindra-Chitrakala: Rabindrasahityer Patabhumika*, Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 1982.

Bhattacharya, N.C. “Paintings of Rabindranath Tagore”, *Roop Lekha* (1958) Volume 28, (1-2) pp 66-74.

Dyson, Ketaki Kushari Dyson and Susovan Adhirai. *Ranger Rabindranath*. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1997.

Rafique, Ahmed Rafique. *Rabindranather Chitrashilpa*. Dhaka: Bangladesh Shilpakala Akademi, 1996.

Tagore, Rabindranath. “Kopai”, *Punascha. Rabindra Rachanavali* Vol. 8. Kolkata: Viswa Bharati Publishing Department, 2010.

Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore. “My Pictures”, *Chitralipi 2*, 1940, Kolkata: Viswa Bharati Publishing Department, Calcutta p.4 Accessed on March 7, 2023

<https://indianculture.gov.in/ebooks/chitralipi-2-rabindranath-tagore>

Tagore, Rabindranath. *The Art of Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2004